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The Swedish elections 2002

Nils Erik Forsgård

Zusammenfassung

Die Reichstagswahlen im September 2002 bestätigten die sozialdemokratische Regierung Göran Perssons; das Machtverhältnis zwischen "linken" und "bürgerlichem" Block veränderte sich nicht. Gewichtsverschiebungen innerhalb der Blöcke aber könnten auf eine veränderte Politik der nächsten Jahre hindeuten und werfen eventuell bereits Schatten auf die Wahl im Jahre 2006 – in dem Schweden vielleicht dem Euro-Verbund beitreten wird.

Nils Erik Forsgård promovierte an der Universität Helsinki und ist seit 2001 Juniorprofessor am Ostsee-Kolleg, Berlin.

The Swedish elections to the Parliament, county councils and municipal councils took place on Sunday, 15 September 2002. The ruling Social Democrats won nearly 40 percent of the votes, gaining 144 of 349 seats in the Parliament. In a historical perspective this is not a particularly high outcome for the Social Democrats, but it is higher than in the elections in 1998 (36.4 percent) and for the first time in 11 years a governing party in Sweden increases its share of the votes in national elections. During the upcoming four years the Social Democratic minority government will remain dependent on the Greens and the Left in Parliament, but Prime Minister Göran Persson immediately after the victory ruled out a formal coalition with the two smaller supporting parties. He still has offered to let the Greens and the Left Party influence government politics by freely placing 8–9 civil servants each in different departments. Due to their parliamentary position as the maker or breaker of a functioning Social Democratic government the Greens had demanded compensating seats in the government, but this was a claim strictly rejected by Persson during the weeks following the elections.

The opponents of the socialists, or the center-right four party coalition, won 43.8 percent of all the votes. In total the four parties on the right won 158 seats in the Parliament. This is one seat less than in 1998. The parliamentary situation in Sweden therefore remains more or less the same as during the last electoral period. The important changes during the last four years seem to have taken place within the two blocs rather than between the two blocs. In September 2002 the Moderate party lost 1/5 of its earlier voters to the Liberals while the Left Party lost 1/4 of its voters, particularly its male voters, to the Social Democrats.

One fundamental problem for the center-right coalition seems to have been the lack of a clear leadership profile. While the four-party conservative bloc attracted enough support during the campaign to rise above the Social Democrats in the polls at the beginning of September, they lacked a central figure to give their cause any personal focus in opposition to the familiar Persson. They were never able to settle on which one of the party leaders

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would become prime minister if they succeeded in getting a parliamentary majority. The Social Democrats had Persson and people knew that a vote for the ruling party automatically would mean four more years with him. The rightist coalition had four potential candidates for the post of prime minister and no one could tell which one of them would turn out to be the strongest in the end. During the spring and parts of the summer the grand old man Alf Svensson (Christian Democrats) was looked upon as a possible candidate. Bo Lundgren (Conservatives), in his capacity as leader of the largest right-wing party, was another standing candidate. But then in August there came Lars Leijonborg (Liberals) and mixed up the whole scene. And Maud Olofsson (Center Party) was the only woman among the four candidates.

In this context one particular outcome of this year's elections has to be mentioned. Sweden strengthens its position as the country with the most equal parliament in the world. The parliament now consists of 45.2 percent women, as compared to the previous *riksdag* which had 42.7 per cent female representation. In reality this means that 158 women now take a seat in the parliament which is 9 more than after the last elections.

The participation in the elections fell to around 80 percent, which is the lowest number in Sweden since 1958. According to a survey on electoral behaviour made after the elections it seems clear that there exists a social divide among e.g. first-time voters. Young people coming from well-off homes with traditional voter behaviours seem to uphold an active and traditional voters role, while on the other hand persons with a background in socio-economically weaker environments tend to take a more passive role.¹

There are, in general, two things to be said about the elections in 2002:

First, a majority of the Swedish people is prepared to pay high taxes to live in a well-functioning welfare system, covering a lifespan "from the cradle to the grave". Swedish politics are still very clearly dominated by economic and social factors, not by existential debates or questions of values. The one party promoting significant tax-cuts, the Conservatives, suffered the greatest losses of any of the seven parties in the elections; the Conservatives lost 7.7 percent of their voters or 27 seats in the parliament. The Conservatives now have a total of 15.5 percent of the voters.

Secondly, the political spectrum in Sweden is clearly moving towards the political center, both as seen from a general point of view and as seen from within the political parties. Altogether the election results imply a strengthening of the political center and a weakening of the extremes, both the right and the left. In ideological terms this means a continuation of a kind of politics where the welfare state is given the highest priority and where the market economy prevails but with certain social preconditions.

A new concept has at the same time been introduced in to Swedish politics; "den borgerliga vänstern" – the rightist left. The great winner in this year's elections was the Liberal Party (Folkpartiet), which increased its total share of the votes given by almost 9 percent compared to the elections of 1998. The Liberals gained 31 seats in the parliament while the party leader himself, Lars Leijonborg, received only 15.9 % of the Liberal votes given in

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his home district Stockholm (this is to be compared with another party leader, the Christian Democrat Alf Svensson, who received almost 35 % of the Christian-Democratic personal votes given in his own county). Anyway, it is highly probable that also the next Swedish elections in 2006 will be dominated by liberal voices and by liberal parties, to which latter category I also count the Social Democrats.

The official results of the Swedish elections:

Left Party (V)	8.3% (-3.6%)
Social Democrats (S)	39.8% (+3.5%)
Greens (mp)	4.6 % (+0.1%)
Centre Party (C)	6.1 % (+1.1%)
Liberals (fp)	13.3 % (+8.6%))
Christian Democrats (kd)	9.1% (-2.6%)
Conservatives (Moderates) (m)	15.2% (-7.7%)
Others	3.0% (+0.4%)

The Social Democratic victory in this years election in Sweden had some symbolic implications, at least when looked upon from a European perspective. The Social Democrats in Sweden broke a recent pattern of defeats for center-left parties across Europe. Conservatives had until then won elections in Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Portugal. Sweden was followed by Germany a week later, and it is possible, but it cannot be said for sure, that the victory in Sweden also gave a boost to the then ongoing Social-Democratic campaign in Germany.

The results of the elections in Sweden might probably also make it easier for the country soon to join the European Monetary Union. Sweden joined Britain and Denmark in deciding not to sign up for the euro during the first wave of monetary union in 1999, but since then opinions have changed. In the year 2000 the Social Democratic party congress voted yes to membership in EMU. Today almost half of the Swedish people seems willing to swap its national currency for the euro (according to a poll made by the Swedish television on the night of the elections). On the other hand, almost 20 per cent of the voters still do not have an opinion, and amongst the members of LO (Trade Unions) there also seems to be widespread distrust of the euro. In other words, Göran Persson still has some work to do in convincing his own people for the sake of the euro. Persson and the Social Democrats have promised a plebiscite on the euro for 2003 and Sweden, with a positive outcome of that referendum, could then be joining the Monetary Union in 2006.

When Göran Persson on October 1st opened the first parliamentary session since the elections he promised to build a "green welfare state" and a "Sweden in which the major environmental problems have been solved". This was a message aimed to please not least the Green Party which holds 17 seats in parliament and which had threatened to vote against the government in a vote of no confidence presented by the leader of the

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Conservatives, Bo Lundgren. As a motivation for a no confidence vote Lundgren had cited the “uncertain situation”. Göran Persson won the no confidence vote by 174 against and 158 votes in favour. 17 members abstained, in other words, the Green Party. The immediate importance of this vote might be, in the words of an editorial in the daily *Dagens Nyheter* on the 9-29-2002, that the Social Democrats no longer can act as a 51-percent party with only 39 percent of the voters backing their politics.

On the other hand, the rejection of the vote of no confidence was also a sign of Göran Perssons’s strong position in Swedish politics. In Europe Persson has gained respect for his administration of the rotating six-month presidency of the European Union, and under Persson Sweden has very clearly been making its way back to a position where social issues are given the highest priority and also to a situation where reforms are being called for, not tax cuts.

Göran Persson’s talk of a green welfare state was a direct result of the debates and discussions following immediately after the elections. The Greens got 4.6 percent of all the votes, as compared to 4.5 percent in the elections of 1998. This can be interpreted as a stand-still. By threatening not to continue the co-operation with the Social Democrats (unless given relevant seats in the government) and by flirting strongly with the rightist coalition during the weeks after the elections, the Greens managed to complicate and delay the building of the new government. This might be interpreted as a sign of a well-functioning and working democracy and the Greens in Sweden now have showed that they are prepared to take and accept different forms of responsibility, in other words also the full responsibility of leading a ministry.

During the past few years the Greens in Sweden have positioned themselves more and more as a leftist party, but one thing that still remains to be seen is whether the Greens during this year’s elections not have lost some of their moral credibility and if they therefore will be powerful enough to enter the parliament again in 2006. During the election campaign the Greens stated that they would never govern together with the Christian Democrats or the Conservatives. Two days after the elections the Green party started negotiating a new government together with the Center Party, the Liberals and the Christian Democrats. This government would have needed parliamentary support from the Conservatives. The same pattern was repeated on a local level in the capital Stockholm. After the Conservatives quite surprisingly lost their traditional stronghold Stockholm to the Social Democrats the Greens started to negotiate with both the right and the left, finally deciding for co-operation with the left. Stockholm will now be ruled by a coalition consisting of the Social Democrats, the Greens and the Left Party. The three leftist parties in the capital have a majority of 52 seats against 49 for the center-right bloc.

After all, the politics of the Greens is mainly based on moral arguments and it seems obvious that the Greens in Sweden had been seeking a position similar to their fellows in Germany today and in earlier days in France. But the lack of a charismatic green leader and the obvious lack of broad backing by the voters did not give any basis for such a solution. In four

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years time the Greens in Sweden might very well face the same destiny as the post-communist PDS in Germany, meaning that they could lose their influence on a national level but still have something to say on a regional and local level. Many of the traditional “green” questions have long ago and in quite a progressive way been adopted by the other parties and the Greens therefore stand out as one of the most conservative and perhaps also one of the more nationalistic parties in today’s Sweden. In an opinion poll conducted for three Swedish newspapers during the first half of October 2002 the Greens had lost almost 25 percent of their voter support as compared to the situation in September.²

When looking at the elections and the political agenda from a European perspective, one can notice that immigration, a potent issue in many other European countries and elections, played little role in the campaign in Sweden. The public debates and newspaper articles published up to the elections were dominated by different aspects of integration, on the economic situation in general and on health-care and education. These issues also seem to have been the main priority for the parties and for the professional politicians themselves. Even though integration turned out to be one of the vital potent issues in the public debates it seems not to have been a favourite topic for the voters. The voters on their part, according to a study conducted by professor Kent Asp, were mainly interested in questions related to health care and employment in general.³

In comparison to the elections of 1998 there were hardly any clearcut ideological debates in 2002. This might perhaps be a direct result of the dominating bloc-politics but perhaps also a result of a political agenda that very clearly avoids cultural issues. In 1998 both the Left Party and the Christian Democrats obviously won many votes by emphasizing justice (fp) and morals or ethics (kd). The Christian Democrats suffered losses in this years elections after having made almost sensational progress in the elections of 1998. There seems to be no obvious reasons for the losses in 2002, except then perhaps for an international economic recession that has not allowed much time and space to be devoted to questions regarding values. The Christian Democrats, on the other hand, very clearly have proved that there is room for a rightist party based on christian-social values also in Sweden. The Left Party in its turn might have lost some male voters after the so called “Taliban-speech” in which the party leader Gudrun Schyman questioned Sweden’s image as a gender-equal society.⁴

The question of integration turned out to be of great importance for the Liberal’s sudden and huge gaining of votes in August and September. In the beginning of August, just a month before the elections, the party leader Lars Leijonborg gave a speech at Gränsö castle at Västervik. This is a tradition and something that Leijonborg has been doing every summer since 1997. At this time, during the month of July 2002, the Liberals had approximately 4.5 percent of the voters. Six weeks later the Liberals received 13.3 percent of all the votes given.

What happened? At Gränsö the Liberals distributed a report called “Towards a new politics of integration”. It has 17 paragraphs. Paragraph 9 states: “Acceptable knowledge of Swedish is to be seen as a requirement

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for citizenship in Sweden". In other words, Leijonborg's Liberals parlayed a proposal to insist that foreigners applying for citizenship be obliged to learn to speak basic Swedish. Nothing more, nothing less. But the Liberal Party at the same time is a promoter of increased immigration, not an opponent of it, and Leijonborg has stated that his plans are aimed at aiding integration and ending the marginalization of newcomers. The proposal in August, therefore, was a stroke of genius, at least seen from the perspective of the up-coming elections. In August the Liberals started climbing very heavily in the polls, with a clear climax reached on election day and with an increased support in the opinion poll made during the first half of October. The proposal put forward by the Liberals also received some positive comments among socialist or left-wing commentators. At the same time we have to remember that Leijonborg's proposal was not well received among the people it primarily concerned, namely the immigrants and refugees. According to a poll made by the Swedish television at the voting locals on the 15th of September, an overwhelming majority of all the immigrants voted red, mainly for the Social Democrats, who gained almost 50 percent of all the votes in this category, but also for the Left Party who gained approximately 23 percent of the immigrant votes. The four rightist parties taken together did not get more than 22.7 percent of the votes of the immigrants. The Liberals gained only 6.7 percent of the immigrant votes, which then is to be related to the overall 13.3 percent of all the votes on a national level. The agrarian Center party is to be found at an absolute bottom level with only 1.5 percent of all the immigrant votes. This of course is in itself no great surprise since the immigrants in Sweden tend to live in urban centers and the Center party in Sweden is an agrarian party with quite strong traditional or conservative values.

So, how are these numbers to be interpreted? They seem to reveal one thing: the immigrants and refugees to Sweden are more interested in the benefits of the Swedish social welfare state than in learning the Swedish language. This is not my interpretation, but an interpretation that could have been made by one of the Conservative partyworkers who some days before the elections stated that the muslims living in Sweden are interested in just two things: giving birth to more muslims and enjoying the benefits of the Swedish social welfare state. His statements were made in front of a tv-camera, but this was something the partyworker was not aware of. The reporter was working under-cover, making a kind of wallraff-style program among Conservatives and Social Democrats. With a hidden camera and a microphone the reporter managed to capture racist statements among party workers on both political sides and these statements might in the end have had something to do with the Conservative's losses in the elections. Many of the harshest comments on foreigners and immigrants namely came from Conservatives. The tv-program, called "Uppdrag: granskning" probably also caused the only real "scandal" or "affair" during this years elections.

The question of racism calls for some remarks on the extreme or far right in Sweden. No political parties hostile to immigrants have had any success in Sweden since 1991, when the populist New Democracy (Ny demokrati) reached 7 percent of the votes. In this years elections the so called Swedish Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna) received a total of 76,300 votes in the whole country. This is a notable increase since in 1998 the party got only a

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total of 20 000 votes. However, the Swedish Democrats still have a long way to go to even reach the 220 000 votes needed to break the 4-percent-limit to get into parliament. In the elections of 2006 the Swedish Democrats themselves are counting with a total of 15 percent of all the votes given. The Swedish Democrats amuse themselves by attacking, among other things, the ruling Social Democrats and their “Muhammed-before Kalle”-politics⁵.

The Swedish Democrats now have a total of 49 mandates (8 in 1998) divided between 29 municipalities. In Malmö the SD has 2 representatives in the municipal council and the other parties have therefore come together to minimize the possible damage caused by the SD. In an act of what perhaps could be called democratic self-defence Malmö has decided to cut down the number of members on each board in the city from 15 to 11. This will automatically exclude the SD from representation on the boards. In the city of Trelleborg the Social Democrats and the parties on the right will be co-operating to fight the influence of the SD. However, this form of democratic self-defence also contains an obvious risk of biting its own tail. The Swedish Democrats have so far never acted in a non-democratic way and to exclude a democratically elected party from different forms of democratic decisionmaking is obviously not the right way to go. The most fatal result of all this would perhaps be a backlash in the form of strongly increased voter sympathy for the SD's in the future.⁶

The Swedish Democrats have their highest following in the southern part of Sweden, notably in the region of Skåne. One reason for the strong support in the south might be the closeness to Denmark and Pia Kjersgaard's Danish Folksparti. During the 1930's and the 1940's the National Socialistic Worker's Party NSAP (Nationalsocialistiska arbetarpartiet) had a high following among pro-German large farmers in the rural areas of Skåne. Today the Swedish Democrats seem to get most of their support in suburbs and from unemployed men or men with a low education.⁷ This observation points to a possible pattern in this year's Swedish elections. The Conservatives in Stockholm obviously lost the elections because of a higher voting activity in the outskirts of the capital. Perhaps it is therefore also possible to say that the Swedish Democrats now have won increased support among hitherto traditional couch-sleepers in different national and regional peripheries.

What is there then to be expected from the Social Democratic minority government during the upcoming four years? The ideological and programmatic deal between the Social Democrats, The Left Party and the Greens consists of 120 paragraphs. It is called “120 punkter för ett tryggare, rättvisare och grönare Sverige” (120 points for a safer, greener and more fair Sweden). The coalition partners, in accordance with Persson's promises of a green welfare state, call for a 4 percent reduction of green house emissions by 2010 and changes in taxes to promote environmentally friendly fuels. One of the more controversial taxes will be imposed on drivers driving during rush-hour in urban centers. The main challenges facing the Social Democrats are, with their own words, the high figures for sick-leave and the exclusion of immigrants in the labour market. The government's target is to halve the number of days of sick-leave by the year

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2008 and to build at least 120 000 new apartments by 2006. Furthermore the health care system will receive a further 20 billion Swedish crowns while at the same time the budget promises 6000 new pre-school teachers and 15 000 new teachers and specialists for the compulsory schools. Sweden also promises to unilaterally stop the fishing of cod in the Baltic Sea from January 1st 2003. The budget also, among other things, contains promises of higher taxes for electricity and more expensive licenses for watching television. There will also be a cultural prize of 5 million Skr devoted to the memory of the writer Astrid Lindgren as well as free entrance to all the state-owned museums.

1 Ekman, Tiina and Staffan Eklund: "Välfärdens förlorare skolkar". In: *Dagens Nyheter*, 16.10.2002.

2 Mp åter under riksdagsspärren, *SvD*, 20.10.2002, poll conducted for Svenska Dagbladet, Göteborgs-Posten and Skånska Dagbladet.

3 Asp, Kent: "Väljarna ratar mediernas favoritfraga". In: *Dagens Nyheter*, 15.9.2002

4 Johansson, Jan A.: "Swedish Election". In: www.spectrezine.org. Johansson is the policy adviser to the SLP at the EP.

5 "I Sveriges namn". In: *Dagens Nyheter*, 29.9.2002.

6 "Sd utestängt i Malmöstadsdelar". In: *Svenska Dagbladet*, 10.10.2002; Friborg, Charlotta: "Rödbla göder bruna krafter". In: *Dagens Nyheter*, 13.10.2002.

7 "Stöveltramp i södra Sverige". In: *Hufvudstadsbladet*, 19.9.2002.